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The Role Of Vulnerability In Athletics: Applications For Future Female Leaders In Combating Feelings Of Shame And Weakness

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THE ROLE OF VULNERABILITY IN ATHLETICS: APPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE
FEMALE LEADERS IN COMBATING FEELINGS OF SHAME AND WEAKNESS

A Thesis Presented

by

Melyssa Woods

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The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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ABSTRACT

Growing up as fairly successful female-athlete, I have always felt somewhat undermined and frustrated when I take a look at the double-standards and social injustice compared to those male counterparts. When it comes to intercollegiate athletics, so much integrity has been lost because of this injustice, as well as the 'win at all costs' mentality. Through my upbringing and the many positive experiences that came into play, however, I have been raised to uphold a strong level of integrity and live my life with honesty. By living and leading with authenticity, feelings of vulnerability and shame often come up. As a female leader, these vulnerable feelings are often shielded and masked in order to better suit the patriarchal athletic society. Through my personal experiences in the sport world, I have found that accepting one's vulnerability is a method to grow as a leader. By tackling feelings of shame directly, female leaders take on a new meaning of resiliency.

Through the process of evaluating my own personal experiences of resiliency during the stages of childhood, collegiate athlete, collegiate coach, and female leader, I have come up with universal applications that look at the role of vulnerability in leadership.

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First and foremost, I would like to thank my family—Debbie Woods, Larry Woods, Jared Woods, and Walter Woods—for their unconditional love and support. Your guidance and belief in my abilities has been instrumental in my meaning-making quest. I will forever be grateful for our shared love, and I hope to make you as proud as you have made me.

Thank you to my friends and colleagues who have helped to instill confidence in my leadership throughout the years. With your loving support and tireless compassion, I have found relief in my own vulnerability. Thank you for not only sharing your stories and experiences with me, but also allowing me to share my story with you.

To the UNH and UVM communities—thank you for allowing me to learn, grow, and transpire. I will forever be indebted to you for allowing my curiosity to bloom, as well as giving me more meaningful relationships than I ever thought possible.

To my partner and best friend, Jim. Thank you for believing in me and always encouraging me to reach my potential. Your love and support means the world to me.

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CHAPTER 1: STORIES MATTER

1.1 Introduction

As a leader and coach, I have always been told to focus on the strengths rather than the weaknesses. Not only in my student-athletes and their abilities as I try to empower them, but also in myself as I grow both personally and professionally. As human beings, we all have characteristics and traits that make up our temperament as we navigate through life. Experiences can bring out not only the best in us, but also the worst. Although these tendencies are heightened during crucial moments, we must force ourselves to accept them, become aware of them, and then use these to move on and grow from them. Certain moments, behaviors, or decisions do not define us but rather give us some ground to work off of. This reality and mindful thinking has allowed me to take my own personal experiences and learn from them. These certain “a-ha” moments of clear personal strengths have been takeaways as I learn to grow as a female leader in athletics. Regardless of the relevancy to the world of sport itself, specific and completely separate moments in my life have given me clarity to find and use my strengths as a way to find meaning or purpose. With the guidance of scholarly personal narrative writing, I have been able to look at these completely isolated experiences and find value, themes, and inspiration.

Scholarly Personal Narrative is a unique and challenging way to bring stories to life. With help from Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray in *How Stories Heal*, I have learned that stories can change the way we feel, heal, grieve, think, love, laugh, and reflect. With the help of their wisdom, I have learned that “nothing is more appealing to readers (especially to our students) than to experience an author’s personal stories with meaning-

making implications that can touch all lives. No matter the age or stage, the personal or collective identity, everyone we know (whether professorial, professional, or pre-professional; whether quarterlife, mid-life, or later-life) is dealing with meaning-making issues that will challenge them, and others, throughout their lifetimes”(8).¹ Through the process of uncovering themes and meaning-making in my own life, this style of writing has allowed me the opportunity to explore small moments that create that last bit of clarity and reasoning. My writing has helped me find those smaller puzzle pieces that maybe fell on the floor while I was trying to complete the puzzle masterpiece. Those fallen pieces helped give the picture a more real and finite illustration. Without those few pieces, the puzzler is left staring at the artwork and wondering how such small pieces and details can take away from an otherwise beautiful, complete picture.

For that reason, no story or small detail throughout my life is insignificant. Every moment has worth, and every experience has somehow brought meaning. Those small moments that went unnoticed years ago are now coming back with a vengeance. These moments are yelling out for me to notice them. They are trying to tell me that through any unexpected situation, I can find hope.

1.2. Scholarly Personal Narrative Methodology

One of the most fascinating parts of working in intercollegiate athletics is the depth of relationships that are built. A diverse population made up of individuals from all walks of life are brought together to form a unique and special community. With such a

¹ Nash, Robert J and Sydnee Viray. 2014. *How Stories Heal*. 1st ed. New York: Peter Lang.

diverse group of human beings there also comes diverse experiences from the past. There is not one experience that has more power than another, and it is through these various experiences that we can find universals and connectivity. The act of sharing one's story, accepting one's narrative, and feeling compassion toward one's life experiences has a certain level of power that cannot be ignored.

The beauty with SPN writing is this level of power that it ignites. Not only does SPN writing help others connect through the universal themes and stories that are shared, but it has also allowed me the strength to own my personal story. For the longest time, I felt like my story wasn't worth sharing. Who wants to hear about some privileged individual's story, anyway? I always felt guilty talking about my past because I didn't want to come across as boastful or arrogant. There are so many human beings in the world who suffer on a daily basis, so I always felt that those are the stories that need to be made aware. Not some average person who was given so many great opportunities in her lifetime. No—the stories that needed to be shared were the ones that could help change the world, or at least change one person's point of view on such topics.

Although there are those stories of suffering that bring out the compassion in people, I have learned through SPN writing that my story can also bring out this compassion. My level of suffering may never amount to others, but that does not mean it is insignificant. Through the act of sharing my story, I have uncovered themes that give me confidence in my life's purpose. SPN writing connects human beings through these themes, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share my experiences with others. If nobody else draws takeaways from my themes, at least I will have drawn purpose and

meaning in my life through the act of SPN writing. It is through the act of writing that vulnerability shines through. And for that, I will forever be grateful.

1.3 eSPN and Meaning-Making

Although Scholarly Personal Narrative writing can bring out the vulnerability in an individual, it is through Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN) that my most honest writing appears. Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative “focuses on the author’s conveying his or her reflections, ideas, revelations, and new ways of thinking to another persons in an effort to contribute to the recipient’s learning and understanding”(140).² Through the process of writing letters to those closest to me, I am able to communicate more freely and authentically. In my process of meaning-making and leadership development, the most challenging thing for me has always been this vulnerability. Writing letters was the first step in my process of unleashing vulnerability and being confident in sharing my story.

With the help of Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang in my Philosophy of Education course, I learned the importance of meaning-making as it relates to universal themes and experiences from my life. By taking an honest look at issues, themes, and ideas that bring purpose to my life, I learned to accept my vulnerability and trust in it’s power. Through this course, I was able to identify my ‘whys to live’ by taking a more holistic approach to

² Nash, Robert J and DeMethra LaSha Bradley. 2011. *Me-Search And Re-Search: A Guide For Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts*. 1st ed. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

learning and growing³. Rather than being stuck in a box (going through the motions), I was able to expand on my previous experiences in order to look ahead to find meaning. The idea of meaning-making is something that led me to this revelation of vulnerability, because without assessing my purpose in life, I would have never thought to engage in universal issues more deeply and honestly. Although the idea of meaning-making was not an original educational goal of mine, I now understand the importance of finding one's purpose and using those experiences to grow both personally and professionally. On top of the personal growth—these experiences, through the use of eSPN writing—can have future implications for others. In order for these implications to have universal themes, we must first become vulnerable.

CHAPTER 2: RESILIENCE AS AN ATHLETE

2.1 Dear Jared and Ryan

Dear Jared and Ryan,

It's hard for me to express my gratitude for the both of you. When I think about my current meaning-making, I can't help but think about the past and how the two of you have had such a positive impact on my life. I know that I'm supposed to create my own individualized purpose in life, but I also recognize that growing up with two older brothers has helped shape me in so many ways. You have been incredible mentors to me, and it saddens me to know that the three of us now live in different time zones. Because

³ Nash, Robert J and Jennifer Jang. 2015. *Preparing Students For Life Beyond College: A Meaning-Centered Vision For Holistic Teaching And Learning*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge.

the two of you have been an important part of my puzzle, I want to share with you my current process in meaning-making.

This past month we have been focusing on vulnerability and shame. The idea of vulnerability definitely frightened me at first, but the core emotions that we feel with this vulnerability is essential in order to grow on so many different levels. I am a natural introvert, so the uncertainty that comes with being vulnerable is something that I am challenged with on a daily basis. However, being able to see the two of you embody this vulnerability, both in the past and present, gives me courage to experience this emotional exposure. I am so proud of the strides you have both made, and more importantly, I am thankful to have the two of you in my life as constant supporters.

When I was entering high school, the three of us couldn't be more different or hesitant toward each other. As we were all on our journey of self-identification and discovery, there was some obvious tension and angst among the three of us. As the youngest sibling, I was fairly observant and perceptive when it came to the two of you. I remember coming home from school one day and learning about Jared's relationship with some pretty girl from school. I thought to myself how odd it was for you to date a girl, because I knew deep down you weren't being true to yourself. Come to think of it, I probably knew you were gay before you even did. When I tried to bring it up in conversation lightly, you pushed me away, and continued to push us all away as you fought that internal battle. Words cannot describe how angry this made me feel. I wanted to support you, but you refused to let any of us help you on your journey of self-discovery. Although I cannot imagine the level of vulnerability you must have felt, we too felt vulnerable and afraid because we could not relate to your pain or struggle. The

night you decided to come out to our family, my heart hurt for you as we started to understand why you seemed so distant from us in the previous years. The amount of courage you showed that night has resonated with me to this day, and I cannot thank you enough for helping me to understand how important vulnerability is.

I think we can all agree that college was the best thing for you and our relationship. You came back from college rejuvenated and excited about the next stage in life. Rather than lashing out at us for not understanding your pain, you showed compassion which helped our relationship deepen. I'm pretty sure mom was confused as to why you didn't talk back, but this respect was finally back to the surface where it belonged. Your enthusiasm and passion for your studies resonated with every word you spoke, and it was inspiring to see you finally start finding meaning in your life. It was incredible how your perspective on life changed a complete 180 degrees after heading off to college. Your enthusiasm for learning and becoming an articulate, successful student was such a moving experience to be a part of. To this day, your passion for learning and becoming a successful businessman has been truly moving.

I think the most exciting thing about having two older brothers is the fact that I can brag about your accomplishments. I know that I have been talking a lot about Jared's success, but the pride I have for you, Ryan, is also extremely overwhelming. Two months ago you decided to get up and move to California without a concrete plan. After working full-time while pursuing your Masters Degree, you finally decided to search for meaning. At first, I thought that this decision was extremely out of character for you. I now understand that you were previously living based on others' expectations, and driving out to California was your way of going on a quest for meaning. The amount of flexibility

you showed by picking up in a completely different place and learning to live based on your own individual criteria has been a pleasure to learn from. Watching you become vulnerable and take risks in this new adventure has allowed you to become wholehearted and mind the gap. You have become more engaged in your actual values and are pursuing goals that matter most to you, rather than our parents.

Although some of your decisions frighten me, I understand that you are making these choices as a way to figure out your values and eliminate the disengagement divide. It worries me when you experiment with different drugs, but I trust your judgment and overall conscientiousness toward your family. I realize that the reason I get so angry with some of your decisions is because I care so deeply about the well-being of our family. I know that at this point in your life, your decisions are based on your quest for personal meaning, but I want you to know that my personal meaning-making is often based on my love for you guys. I don't expect you to change any of your decisions for me, but I want you to be aware of my love and support for the two of you.

Knowing that the two of you are miles away has made me feel more vulnerable than anything else. I often get angry at your selfishness for choosing to move away, because what if something was to happen to one of you? How could you put Mom in this situation and allow her to worry about you guys when sickness strikes and there is no easy way for her to visit you? How do you think it makes us feel when you only visit a couple times a year (if we're lucky)? I feel terrible having these feelings of anger and sadness, but I need you to know that it comes from a place of love and tenderness. Everyday I wonder about your overall well-being and am left feeling vulnerable and numb. The three of us are not the best at keeping in touch, and this only adds to my

feelings of vulnerability and guilt. I hope that as we grow older, we continue to look out for each other and create a sense of serenity within our relationship.

The last thing I want to bring up is the relationship between the two of you. I look up to the both of you in so many ways, and it troubles me to know that you guys still have a rocky relationship. I understand that Ryan may feel some resentment toward you, Jared, so it is important to me that the two of you talk through these issues. In high school, I could tell that Ryan felt attacked and humiliated. He was constantly put down about his appearance, grades, and anything else you (Jared) felt the need to mock him about. Because you were going through an internal struggle and were so miserable, you took this out on Ryan since he was an overall well-liked and happy teenager. I know he didn't look affected by these harsh words, but I could tell he was crushed by your resentment. To this day, Ryan is still concerned about his outward appearance, and struggles with confidence issues. Because you are the older sibling, he took a lot of your words to heart, and it frustrates me that the two of you will not talk about the past. It clearly still affects Ryan to this day, and I truly believe that we would feel closer if we got everything off our chests. It will feel vulnerable and frightening to lay down our deepest feelings, but I cannot take another day of distrust between the two of you.

I wish for the both of you to ask yourself "why?". Why did Jared's cruel words hurt? And why did Ryan make you feel the need to act out? More importantly, why won't the two of you discuss these feelings and work to develop your relationship? I constantly hear the frustration from both of you about one another, and enough is enough! You are both equally successful and important, and I want you to both acknowledge that in the other person. I wish for you guys to lower your shields and masks and commit to being

vulnerable with each other. If Brene Brown has taught me one thing, it's that vulnerability can change one's perspective on experiences and cause us to change our outlook on relationships. You guys are both 'enough', and I want this vulnerability to help bring more purpose and meaning to your relationship and lives.

One of my earliest childhood memories is making a scarecrow with the two of you. Jared, you were the strategic one who made a plan of action for creating the scarecrow, and Ryan, you were the one throwing leaves in the air and creating a fun, light atmosphere. I was somewhere in the middle, working hard to get as many leaves as possible for our scarecrow. To this day, Mom and Dad tell me that I am the exact combination of the two of you. If the two of you were to have a child (gross, but hypothetical), I have been told that I would be the end product. This is the greatest compliment in my opinion, because the two of you are incredible human beings. You both have exemplary qualities, and my appreciation for the two of you has helped guide me in my meaning-making. I strive to make the two of you proud, and you are my beacon for being the best possible version of myself. Knowing I have your support makes me feel invincible, and having you two as mentors and role-models enables me to take risks. Obviously I think about my own personal needs first, but you both have enriched my life greatly and this definitely helps guide my values.

Throughout this semester on my quest and learning of meaning-making, I constantly relate the topics of vulnerability, purpose, and the ten virtues to our past and the joyful memories it has brought me. I am fortunate enough to have a supportive family who has brought me such positive experiences. These experiences, and the love we all share, has helped be a guiding point for my existence and purpose in life. I value family

and the sense of belongingness it creates, and I am extremely thankful for this. I want the two of you to feel as strongly about our family as I do, because I can feel the love and joy when we are all together. My greatest memories have been with the both of you, and I hope to someday have children who cherish these sibling bonds as much as I do. I am beyond grateful for your everlasting support, and I know that I would not be the person I am today if it was not for the both of you.

To end, I just want to thank you both for playing a huge role in my meaning-making. This might come as a surprise to you because I tend to hold my feelings in, but this past semester I have learned to express my thoughts and vulnerabilities. So for that reason, I am hoping you guys will join me on my remaining quest for meaning-making. Thank you for being such positive influences on my life and giving me purpose.

With Love,

Melyssa

2.2 Why the Past Matters

I have always disliked writing about my upbringing and family because I feel as if some type of bad karma will come from gloating about my fond memories. Anytime I start to express my gratitude for everything life has brought me, a sense of guilt or worry washes over me. Why is it that I have been so fortunate, and why have *I* been lucky enough to have spared such agony that others go through? Each time I recollect a joyous memory, I have this feeling of anticipation that something bad is about to happen. I realize that I am extremely lucky in many different ways, so I can only wonder if my luck is going to soon run dry. Nobody is invincible so how much longer can I be spared?

These are just a few of the many thoughts that run through my head as I try to dig up a personal narrative, so please forgive the hesitation as I share with you a little bit about my past.

Although I am extremely hesitant to relish in my past, I feel that this is vital in my personal and professional development. Everything I have been through in my 25 years of life has led me to this very moment so it is important for me to understand where my authenticity has come from. Why does this one word have so much meaning in my life, in my vocation, and all that my future may hold? And what exactly from my past has actually created this longing for authenticity?

Sometimes the best way to find answers about yourself is to dig a little deeper. Brene Brown once stated that, “I now see how owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do” (xiv).⁴ Regardless of the experiences, both good and bad, my past has helped shape me into the individual I am today. There shouldn’t be shame or guilt in living a fulfilled life. I must own my story and truly be proud of these experiences if I wish to help others’ fulfill their hopes and dreams. For that reason, I wish to share with you my upbringing. Not to gloat or brag, but simply to give myself and others the context for my ultimate beliefs and means for living.

2.3 Family and Authenticity

Looking back to my early childhood, the most vivid thing I can remember is the compassion that my family shared. Each individual in my family had a certain sensitivity to their innate characteristics, and although it may not have been overtly shown, I could

⁴ Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, xiv.

sense it in their everyday actions. One such way that this compassion was expressed can be illustrated in the equality that my siblings and I shared. I have my parents to thank for this unconditional support, and I hope my two older brothers would feel the same way. This impartial behavior toward all three children is what has given me strength throughout the years. Strength to not only stand up for myself and my own self-confidence, but for other females who may lack that support.

The funny thing about my whole experience as child is that I'm not even certain my parents consciously made these decisions. For all I know, they didn't even mean to treat me equal to my two older brothers. But for now, I'm going to pretend that they raised us all as equal beings.

Growing up with two older brothers, I was constantly trying to fit in and keep up with them. I looked up to them so dearly and wanted so badly to inherit their traits. I wouldn't go so far as obsessed, but I did long for their acceptance much like other younger siblings would have. I wanted to be like them so desperately that I actually got the chicken pox at the same time as them. Maybe that physiologically made sense because we lived together and passed along germs, but part of me knows that I strategically planned that so I could stay home with them. If they weren't going to slow down, then neither was I. I mean come on, I even tried to pee standing up because I knew that's how they did it. Whenever I tell people this fact, they always reply with, 'your poor mother'. Sure, that may have been frustrating to potty-train a girl with two older brothers, but she knew what she was getting herself into when she gave me choice at such a young age. Both she and my father treated me as a child and just that. They didn't try to inconspicuously condone patriarchy amongst us children. For this reason, I have them to

thank for my responsibility. My responsibility to continuously fight to better myself and find equality as a female leader in athletics.

My competitive nature obviously started at a young age because of this desire to be like my brothers. Both my parents were very active so this trickled down to the three of us children. Before we were old enough to attend preschool or grade-school, we spent most of our days running around outside. Because we lived in a neighborhood with several other families with children our age, this meant for constant excitement and endless activities. My parents didn't have to worry about much during the day because the children were content playing outside for hours at a time. Much to my surprise, all the children in the neighborhood happened to be males. Not only was I the youngest child in the neighborhood, but I was also the only female. Because my parents encouraged and supported us all equally, that only made me want to fit in that much more. Although I understood my gender and identified as a female, that didn't stop me from wanting to be treated like my peers, regardless of their gender. If I could keep up with the boys during four-square or cops and robbers, then why should I expect to be treated differently? In my eyes at that age, that was what made sense. If I could hold my own while my brothers wrestled with me, then why did outsiders need to treat me differently because of my sex? Maybe at that young of an age I didn't realize it or do it on purpose, but I was breaking barriers and leading the way for my future.

2.4 Throw Like a Girl

Fast-forward a few more years and that will bring you to a moment that I can still vividly remember. When I graduated from tee-ball and could finally participate in Little

League, I knew I had to prove myself. After years of practicing and playing around with my brothers, I had confidence that I was ready to step in and play with the older boys. Because my parents gave me a voice and respected my competitiveness, they agreed to sign me up for baseball as opposed to softball. Maybe they felt it would be more convenient to have me on my brother's team, but I like to think it was because they supported my drive. Regardless of the reason, I was beyond ecstatic to finally be on an official team with my one brother and his friends. I had full confidence in my abilities, and I couldn't wait to share those moments with one of my brothers, who also happened to be a huge idol of mine.

During our first practice, I have to admit that I started out a little shy like always. But after a few reps with my brother, I began to ease up and tried to focus on having fun. When our coach announced we would end the practice with a scrimmage, I knew that was my moment to prove myself and prove my worth on the "boy's" team. During my first at-bat, I had a great hit that went to the shortstop. Because of my quickness, and a fifth-grader's overall lack of strength to throw someone out, I sped through first-base. Safe. I remember looking over at my parents at that moment and seeing them smile. I felt their pride and was overwhelmed with a sense of accomplishment. At that moment, I knew I could compete with anyone if I put my mind to it. As long as I loved what I was doing, I didn't need permission from anyone else.

During the next play, the player at-bat hit a hard ball to center field. As I rounded second base, I glanced at the fielders to decide my next move. I had confidence in my speed and base running abilities, so I took a risk and decided to head for third. Luckily for me, my effort paid off and I was announced safe. Again, I remember looking over at

my parents and brother and having a sense of pride climb over me. It was at that moment that the third-base coach commented, “good job, son”. Although the coach meant no harm in this statement, and innocently thought I was a boy because of my short hair, I was mortified in that moment. I’m not sure if I was embarrassed because he thought I was a boy, or if I was angry because he assumed I must be a boy if I competed at the same level as the other boys. Regardless, that was a pivotal moment in my identity development and overall outlook on competitive sport, especially as it pertains to females.

Although that moment was in no way traumatizing, it still resonates with me. The next day after that incident, I decided to switch over to softball. Not because I couldn’t compete with the baseball players or was embarrassed, but because I felt disrespected. I may have been too young to put my feelings into words or express those very thoughts, but part of me understood my right to be treated with respect. Whether that comment was purposeful or not (most-likely it was not), I felt that I was entitled to make choices that would better support myself. For that reason, I chose to surround myself with other strong, competitive females in order to avoid future dilemmas. Although at first I thought that was taking the easy way out, I then started to understand that I chose to change teams because I wanted to be treated equally much like my family presented at such a young age.

Being seen in the same light as boys during sports at a young age is often a distant phenomenon. Although I switched over to softball to get my female fix, I still played on a boy’s travel hockey team until I was in high school. As I mentioned earlier, I was a fairly confident and independent individual when it came to sport. I can vividly remember all

the parents going into the locker room before games or practices to tie their children's skates. People would constantly make comments on the fact that I was the only player in the locker room who didn't need a parent's help to get ready. But can you blame me? I would never let my parents come in to tie my skates, because I always felt the need to prove myself in front of the boys. It was hard enough being the only girl on the team, and letting my parents in to help me get ready would only paint me to be that much weaker. The first few weeks my skates were far too loose, but that was the price I was willing to pay in order to prove myself. Although making sacrifices to prove yourself to males should never be a thing, reality shows differently.

These experiences as an adolescent subconsciously strengthened my desire to reach a high standard of athleticism. Not only that, but they have paved the way for how I view the world of sport. I was lucky enough to be supported in my endeavors, and even encouraged to challenge myself against the ordinary. Because my parents grew up equally supporting my interests to those of my brothers, I have come to value the importance of women in sport. Not only do I now value the importance of sport in the lives of female student-athletes, but I have come to respect the value that sport has had in my life. I have been fortunate enough to experience these fond memories and have those positive role-models, so why should I hold back from sharing that with others?

In Marietta McCarty's *How Philosophy Can Save Your Life*, the concept of flexibility is emphasized through that idea of using your experiences and turning them into something better. It is stated that, "Freedom comes through complete acceptance of reality. Those who wish to keep their illusions do not move at all; those who fear them

run backwards into greater illusions, while those who conquer them ‘Walk on’” (114).⁵ Based on the numerous (personal) situations of adversity I have been faced in during sport throughout my life, I have accepted that females are marginalized. This is a reality. Even though it is not something I agree with, it is a reality that we must face in order to overcome it. I was often blinded of this illusion because of the equality and support that my parents showed me, but unfortunately too many other individuals are not spared that support. Too many young female-athletes are discouraged or turned away, and this is what continues to give me meaning. I am lucky enough to have so many great memories because of athletics, so the world of sport needs to continue to support young females in the pursuit of athletics. This support and encouragement comes down to one thing: respect. Respect for the voices of young girls, much like I was allowed, and respect in the abilities of individuals. Respect in the level of equality given, and the compassion that follows. Respect for not only females, but all individuals.

2.5 The Role of Resiliency in Early Childhood

This desire to earn respect and give respect has given me meaning in my young-adulthood. I have been given the gift of athletics as a means for cultivating purpose. Although I have tried many times to look elsewhere for my meaning-making, I have accepted my reality and now realize that it is not a burden to be involved in athletics. There are many people who despise sports and do not understand the significance of intercollegiate athletics, but that should be no excuse for me to give up on something that has had so much meaning in my life. If I am to be true and authentic, then my hope is to

⁵ Marietta McCarty, *How Philosophy Can save Your Life: 10 Ideas That Matter Most* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009), 114.

help make a difference in the world of sport, especially for the trivialized females. I am in a position where I have leadership ability, so it is my duty to help the cause for those who have lost their voice. As Viktor Frankl once stated, “Man is capable of changing the world for the better if possible, and of changing himself for the better if necessary” (131). By not only accepting my strengths but allowing them to overcome me, I have started to adapt my meaning-making to help not only myself, but those around me. It is not that I think I must change myself for the better, but rather change the way I exist and put myself out there in order to help others. We can decide what our existence will be by being flexible in any given moment⁶, and my privileged childhood has taught me just that.

So to bring you back to my initial thought, I am extremely grateful for my family and the support they have shown me throughout the years. They have never expected me to be anything other than myself, and I have come to terms with that. I am an individual who lives for sport, and that doesn't need to be perceived as a bad thing. I shouldn't be ashamed of living a fulfilled life, and I'm constantly trying to remind myself that what I'm doing has worth. Some individuals may help better the world by doing charitable work, but what gives me meaning is using my positive experiences to bring justice to the world of intercollegiate athletics. There is not one situation that can be weighted with more suffering, because each individual or moment has meaning in their own way. One bad event doesn't diminish that of another being, and one good event doesn't take precedence over another. As Viktor Frankl made very clear, understanding and having this sort of compassion is what helps bring meaning to the lives of people.

⁶ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 131.

My entire life has been spent trying to prove my worth as a female through competitive sport. I never really looked at it from that lens before, but my past experiences speak louder than any words. I was constantly trying to better myself as an athlete in order to be seen as an equal to my male counterparts. On the inside, I felt as if I was more similar than not to my brothers; on the outside, I knew that those perceptions from others were very different than my own. Although my family created us as equal beings, the outside world is not that compassionate and understanding. Females are constantly faced with adversity as athletes, coaches, and administrators. The most frustrating thing with this is the fact that we are all human beings, but something as simple as a gender identity can change how one of those humans is being treated. Being able to see these issues first-hand has given me the confidence to lead equally with my head and my heart. Just as I was given the respect as a child and appreciated for what I had to offer as opposed to what I lacked, I hope to pay it forward and lead with integrity to inspire other females in the world of athletics. This is what has given me meaning thus far, and this is what will continue to give me meaning as time goes on. It is not only now my responsibility to encourage and support younger female athletes, but it is my desire. My fortunes have led me to this moment, so I must appreciate the authenticity it has brought me. It is my hope to pass along this empowerment to other females through my role in athletics.

Now more than ever, females deserve this same opportunity to feel empowered through sport. The role that athletics can play in a child's life is extremely powerful and the first step is combating that initial feeling of vulnerability. Maria Bobenrieth and Elizabeth Tenety stated this idea beautifully in an article about resiliency— "In sports

you learn to fall down, to get up. You learn to win, you learn to lose, you have a team, you have a role, and you learn sometimes to sit on the bench and get hurt. There are so many pieces about sport that help you practice and let your leadership emerge.”⁷

As a female, this idea of resiliency through sport can be strengthened over time. By having uncomfortable moments of vulnerability—whether it be sitting on the bench or discouragement due to a loss—leadership qualities can emerge. These qualities can be heightened with guidance from a strong community of role-models and like-minded individuals. We hear so many stories of successful female leaders, but we often forget to note the prominent figures who helped them reach their goals. These individuals are often like-minded, strong female leaders who lift other women up. Through sport and vulnerability, this community support is what helps enhance one’s leadership moving forward. The importance of one’s past experiences and supportive communities must not be overlooked when analyzing leadership potential. For that reason, my own personal and professional relationships have purpose in strengthening my leadership qualities.

2.6 Injury Recovery and Resiliency

Looking back on my time as a Division I student-athlete, I can honestly say that the entire experience as a whole is one of the most difficult things I have ever gone through. On top of the physical exhaustion from the daily training, it was also the hardest mental workout of my life. I had some sort of idea of what I was getting myself into

⁷ Bobenrieth, Maria and Elizabeth Tenety. 2015. "Leadership And Resilience Through The Power Of Sport". *Berkley Center For Religion, Peace & World Affairs*. <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/forum/leadership-and-resilience-through-the-power-of-sport>.

when I committed my senior year in high school, but nobody could actually fully prepare you for that type of commitment. Although my time as a student-athlete was an emotional (and physical) roller-coaster, I would not have change a single thing about my experience.

It takes a special place to give you that instant approval and gratification just by walking on campus, and that is exactly what UNH did for me when I was looking at colleges. The immediate atmosphere of the campus, team, and coaches felt beyond perfect. I knew from that very moment that my life would be forever changed. Although my parents made me visit the last three remaining schools on my list, I already knew that UNH was going to be program for me. The very day that I finished my other college visits, I verbally committed to the coach at UNH. A huge weight was lifted off my shoulders, and the anticipation for the next stage in my life was starting to creep in.

The first year as a student-athlete was somewhat a blur. Trying to acclimate to the college lifestyle while also focusing on your academics and athletics was definitely more challenging than I anticipated. I was always a strong student in high school, but nothing prepared me for the time management and stressors that coincided with athletics. In other words: my first two semesters were a crap-chute. Although my academics were not to my previous high standards, the support of my teammates and coaches is what got me through that first year. They pushed me to challenge myself, grow from my mistakes, and learn to overcome any obstacles that stood in my way.

Fast-forward a few years and it will bring you to the most mentally and physically challenging time of my young-adulthood. Going into my senior year of college, I was in the best physical shape of my life. The previous year we won the America East

Championship and made it to the NCAA's, so the four Seniors were gearing up for a repeat championship so we could end our careers on a high note. As the captain of the team, I worked tirelessly to improve both myself and the team on and off the field. I was extremely committed to the program and was excited to see what my final season had in store for me and my fellow Seniors.

This brings you to my earlier point about a specific challenging event. A month before pre-season while we were helping to coach at the UNH Summer camp, I tore my ACL while playing at night. The hardest part about that moment was seeing the fear in my teammates' eyes. I knew the second I went down that it was serious, but people tried to remain hopeful and calm. The irony behind the situation was the fact that I was in the best physical shape of my life at that time. Unfortunately, there are some things you cannot predict, and this was one of them. As a coach, and even as a player, there are some things you never really consider when planning for a season. This specific case was one of them. Nobody planned for the Senior Captain to be injured, and it was hard to picture the field without me as their central midfielder. Nonetheless, my coach poured herself a stiff drink the night she found out about my injury, but it was off to work the very next day.

Immediately following my MRI results, the athletic training staff and coaches were on me to start pre-habilitation. The sooner I could gain my strength and mobility back, the sooner I could have my surgery, which meant I could get back on the field. I can recall my coach hesitating to let me go home the week after my injury happened, but my parents won that battle. For my mental sanity, I needed a week to just let myself be angry and sad at the fact that this happened to me. I needed a week to reflect and really be

mindful of the entire situation. Although in the back of my mind I knew I would take a medical redshirt and return for a fifth season, part of me thought that I was too mentally burnt out to return. That thought quickly passed through, and I eventually was well on my way to recovery.

Although I eventually made the decision to take a fifth season, nobody involved in the situation actually asked me if that was what I truly wanted. The day after I actually tore my ACL, my coach told me I was coming back and she would find the money to support me. My coaches, as well as my parents, were extremely supportive in my recovery. For those familiar with an ACL recovery, it is a very long process that can be mentally challenging. It was extremely hard to watch my fellow Senior class play in their last season without me, and the added physical-recovery portion added that much more stress. I wasn't able to run for nearly four months, and that can take a pretty hefty toll on someone's emotional state. Combine that emotional stress from my own personal recovery with the demandingness of my coach, and that will cause a serious breakdown.

Long story short, the demandingness and strict culture of the coach and program paid its toll on me. If I was doing a favor by coming back for a fifth season, then why was the coach harder on me that last season than the previous four years? I never asked for that to happen to me, and certainly nobody asked for my opinion in terms of what was best for my future. I felt underappreciated and used, and these are hard feelings to deal with when you put your heart and soul into something. I was hands down the hardest worker on the team for my entire career, and I felt like this was ignored. For that reason, I had to make a personal (and professional) decision on whether or not I would leave the team. I spent several nights that Spring of my Senior year crying and confused. It was

hard to gain insight from my parents, because it was obvious they wanted me to end my career playing, rather than wasting my last year recovering. Not only that, but my coaches thought it would be wasteful to spend all that time recovering and decide not to come back for one last season. My teammates, on the other hand, genuinely understood my frustration and angst. They got it. They knew our coach played a huge factor in my hesitation to stay on the team, and they didn't blame me for having those thoughts.

With that being said, it was time to make a serious decision. Do I leave the team and potentially regret cutting my athletic career short? Or do I stay on the team and carry myself with humility although I disagree with my unfair treatment? Do I put my dedication to my teammates above my own personal battles? And lastly, what is the best way to get ultimate closure for all entities involved?

2.7 Compassion in Sport

When I look at this ethical dilemma a few years later, I can begin to understand where my decisions stem from. I clearly could have written for ages about my experience as a student-athlete at UNH, and I guess this makes sense when I relate it to my background beliefs. To give you even more context than I already have, let me quickly explain the type of program and team that I played for at UNH. For starters, the head coach has been at the realm of the program for 25 years. She is one of the most passionate coaches I have ever met, and although she does not overtly express those emotions, the level of compassion she has for any player (good, bad, starter, non-starter, etc.) is truly an honor to have witnessed. On top of a truly committed coaching staff, the type of players recruited to play for her program are really quite special. They are some

of the most hard-working, competitive, and genuine females I have ever had a pleasure of knowing. The moment you step on campus for your first pre-season, you are immediately bonded with a group of people who are bound to change your life. Although everyone had their own unique qualities, we all shared a similar compassion toward one another.

The Dalai Lama described compassion as “wanting to do something to relieve the hardships of others, and this desire to help, far from dragging us further into suffering ourselves, actually gives us energy and a sense of purpose and direction.”⁸ This line perfectly sums up my experience throughout my collegiate experience. Without the compassion of others, I’m not sure if I would have been able to produce the self-compassion during some of those tougher weeks. This was a cultivation of everyone’s personal experiences that brought us closer together during those crucial moments. This compassion strengthened my background beliefs, and solidified my authentic nature. Looking back, I now understand that the level of honesty shared amongst the team helped give me the confidence to stay true to myself, and to make decisions with integrity.

In the end, I decided to fulfill my duty to the team and return for a fifth season. Ultimately I chose to put any frustration I had with the coaching staff on the backburner, so I could truly focus on enjoying the last few months I had with my team. After all, this was the sport I fell in love with many years ago, and these are the teammates who have seen me at my worst and best self. I not only owed it to myself to end on a good note, but I owed it to those teammates who were relying on me to bring my best self to my final season. Ultimately, this justification supported my core beliefs, and the community I

⁸ Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, Dalai Lama XIV, 1935-. *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

found through my teammates is what led me to make an honest and authentic decision. There were moments when I had to put my immediate and irrational feelings aside in order to look at the situation with a clear perspective. I wish I could say that I was able to do this on my own, but it was the support of my teammates that strengthened me and gave me that clarity.

To fully understand why this dilemma could actually be considered a dilemma, you might also need to understand the context behind my experience as a student-athlete. The fact that this experience helped shape my character and authenticity made this decision that much more valuable in the long-run. This group of people became not only an instrumental community to me, but also a sentimental community where I was able to flourish and create genuine relationships. I think the beautiful thing about a team's bond as strong as ours is the sense of belonging that it creates. Regardless of graduation year, the UNH field hockey program has created a constitutive community that brings a sense of solidarity to our lives. Regardless of our upbringing, our most positive virtues that we hold are enhanced because of this community that lives-on far behind graduation.

Looking back on my entire experience, I can't imagine playing field hockey at another institution. My decision to play out my fifth season was my way of staying true to my first moral language, and I could not have come to that decision without the support of my team and closest community. The respect I had for my teammates and coaches carried over into the respect I found for myself. This experience played a huge role in the way I carry myself today, and I always use that experience as a way to strengthen my integrity whenever I lead others. Although I could have made the decision to leave the team, I ultimately chose to push through any emotional battle in order to

grow both personally and professionally. I will forever be indebted to this program, and I have my teammates and coaches to thank for helping to reinforce my identity.

2.8 Double Standards

Growing up as a fairly successful female-athlete, I have always felt somewhat undermined and frustrated when I take a look at the double-standards and social injustice compared to those male counterparts. When it comes to collegiate athletics, so much integrity has been lost because of the ‘win at all costs’ mentality. I have been raised to uphold this level of integrity and live my life with honesty, so I often use a scenario from my college experience as fuel to better myself, in order to better the world of sport.

During my last semester as an undergraduate student, one of my friends and former teammates was assaulted by a very gifted and well-known football player. At the time, four of my friends lived together off-campus, so I often spent the night in order to fulfill my social quota for the weekend. One specific night, I was the first one to go to sleep while the rest of my friends were out socializing late at night. During the middle of the night, I awoke to an argument which ended in someone punching a hole in the wall. I came out of the bedroom and found one of my friends, Kelly, crying with a confused look on her face. I asked her if everything was okay, but she told me not to worry about it. She was clearly intoxicated, so I assumed it was a dramatic and unnecessary blow-up. Regardless, something about the situation didn’t sit well with me so I reached out to her other roommates to see if they had any clarification.

The next morning, the entire story started to unfold. This particular event, as do many stories in college, started at one of the bars downtown. Apparently Kelly was

questioning her boyfriend's faithfulness and honesty to her. There were rumors milling around that her boyfriend, Ryan, was being unfaithful. Because of Kelly's insecurities, or maybe her complete lack of care, she never felt the need to stand up for herself. For that reason, Molly decided she disliked the way her friend was being treated and finally tried to find answers and do something about the dishonesty. That night at the bar, Molly approached another female at the bar to find out concrete answers about Ron and his unfaithfulness. She couldn't stand the thought of her best friend, Kelly, crying over these lies every night, so she did what she thought was right.

The girl who Molly approached at the bar admitted to being involved romantically with Ryan, and told her she would tell Molly all the details back at home. As they took a cab back to this girl's house, somehow Ryan found out that his secret was being unleashed. Infused with alcohol and testosterone, he rushed back to the house to confront the two girls. Rather than accepting the fact that his secret of infidelity was out, he let his anger take control. He proceeded to grab Molly's phone out her hands and smash it on the ground in order to prevent her from letting Kelly in on his secret. Because Molly was raised to stand up for herself and her friends, she didn't let that stop her from finding out the truth. This created more frustration for Ryan, so he then made matters worse by shoving Molly and dragging her out of the girl's bedroom with a few threatening words. The dilemma ended with a few of Ryan's roommates bringing Molly to safety and trying to settle down everyone involved in the situation.

The next morning when Molly returned home, she told us all the story and showed us a few physical marks that could be seen on her arm. We immediately told her that she needed to go to the police and tell someone of authority. She was unsure if that

was the correct decision because it was her best friend's boyfriend, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to be responsible for causing a scene. To make matter's worse, Kelly begged and pleaded for Molly not to mention anything, because Ryan was less than a year away from potentially entering the NFL Draft. Not only was Kelly adamant that Molly stay quiet, but her mother made sure to call her up and tell her that speaking up could affect Ryan's entire career.

Are you kidding me? Who cares about Ryan's career or their clearly unstable and broken relationship. He should be held responsible for his actions, and no innocent woman should be treated in that manner. Bottom line. The rest of us reminded Molly of these points, and she eventually went to her parents for advice. Her father was furious, for obvious reasons, and called Ryan's coach who he had a former relationship with. However, by this time when Molly brought it to their attention, the physical evidence was gone. For whatever reason, Molly and her father then decided not to press charges with the police. Although the police were not involved, the head football had enough information to take disciplinary actions within the team. Because Ryan was the star player and the police were not involved, the coach chose to turn the cheek. This still fires me up to today, because as someone who holds a leadership position, it is your obligation to uphold the highest standards of integrity. In order to hold players or students accountable, you need to first hold yourself accountable.

Although I do believe that the coach does hold himself to a morally high standard and is generally a good guy, I can't help but wonder how I would make a different choice if I was ever to be placed in a similar role. It's great and dandy that he believes in giving guys a second chance, but as student-athletes who are in the spotlight, allowing athletes

(especially men) to get away without consequences only makes the sport world more corrupt. Since he is a star football player with potential, everyone turns the cheek. If the role was reversed and a female student-athlete was seen fighting, then all hell would break loose and even the media would somehow find out. As an individual who hopes to hold a leadership position, this dilemma is something that I always contemplate and think back to.

At this point in time, it is very clear that at the core of my 1st Moral Language there lies a strong sense of integrity and honesty. This integrity is the underlying theme for all the decisions I do (or do not) make, and my guiding values somehow always come back around to this concept of integrity. I believe that honesty plays a huge a role in the way I treat not only others, but myself, as well. I look at each situation with an open mind and justify my decisions based on what I believe will create the most honorable results. One might ask how I would define or characterize these morals. My simple answer is that these characteristics are not always concrete, and my reasoning for my justification could alter depending on the situation. Ultimately this justification would somehow have integrity at the core and be based on the most honest thing in any given situation.

My stance on justice when it comes to harming an innocent human being is pretty clear, and I believe that individuals should be treated with respect if they are clearly respectable people. No crime or assault should come unwarranted, and I am a strong believer in this when it comes to setting an example for others, especially student-athletes. In terms of the situation that took place, the most glaring ethical issue is the fact that someone in a leadership position chose to selfishly make a decision. It takes a person of high integrity to make a decision based on long-term outcomes and justice for the

overall greater-good, and this is what type of leader I aspire to be. This eye-opening experience gave me the push I needed to pursue a career in collegiate athletics. Although this was an extremely unfortunate situation—for many parties involved—it gave me confidence in my leadership ability and desire to lead with integrity moving forward. This undoubtedly vulnerable moment helped me grow once again.

2.9 Using Past Experiences to Examine Strengths

They say bad things happen in threes, and that is exactly what happened for my parents a few years back. They are both extremely hard-working and selfless people, so my heart aches for them whenever they go through any type of struggle. After several days, months, and even years of putting in hard work to my childhood house, my parents decided to sell the house they lived in for twenty years. My mother was extremely proud of the cosmetic work she had done to get the house ready for the market. My dad was equally pleased with the progress they had made, but even more pleased with how the house would compare to others on the market. All that hard work was going to pay off, both figuratively (for my mother) and literally (for my father). The finishing touches were being put into place, so my father figured the Spring would be an ideal time to sell the house. Another month for last-minute touches? Not a problem.

Unfortunately, the plans to make any updates came to a sudden halt one morning in February. First bad news: the furnace broke. Although this seems like such an insignificant event, and perhaps it was for my parents at that very moment, this had a trickle-down effect on the rest of their week. Not only was it the coldest month of the year, but dropping a significant amount of money on a furnace definitely wasn't in their

budget. Regardless of the cost, my parents reluctantly looked into how soon a new furnace could be installed. My mother, a natural worrier, was adamant that the furnace be installed as soon as possible. They had three dogs and a cat to look after, so naturally this was her reasoning. My extremely frugal father, on the other hand, insisted that they could use the natural wood-burning fireplace as an alternative for a few days. Although I'm sure the argument could have lasted for weeks, my father ended up winning that battle. Not because they decided it was the most cost-efficient or realistic decision, but because the second bad news came shortly after.

Second bad news: my father's mother passed away. After a long and hard battle with Alzheimer's Disease, my grandmother was taken with grace. When I received the call while I was in my dorm room at college, I knew I immediately had to go home to be with my parents. Because my grandparents on my father's side lived in Syracuse and I did not see them often, I didn't quite know how to feel about the whole situation. That was the first death (other than a pet) I had experienced, so I was unsure about how to react. Regardless of my emotions or feelings in that very moment, I had a longing to be with my parents during that tough time. I packed my bags and left campus for an extended weekend. When I made it home to my parents' house in New York, there was a cold sensation that ran through my body. Not only from the thought of one of my parents losing a parent, but the actual physically cold house that I came home to. My parents explained that the furnace broke, but because we had to leave to go to my grandmother's funeral in Syracuse the next day, it could not be replaced until they returned. That reasoning totally made sense to me, and compared to the second piece of bad news they received, the furnace breaking really didn't seem like a big deal anymore.

In an effort to keep the house warm without a furnace, my parents started a fire in our wood-burning fireplace. It was cozy, and we all enjoyed the smell and atmosphere that was left in the living room whenever those first logs were placed. Because the energy in the house was a little low after the news of my grandmother, we opted to stay in for dinner. We also had to get up early the next morning to depart for Syracuse, so this decision was fine by me. We would get to bed early, wait for my brother to arrive in the morning, then head to Syracuse to be with my father's family. The plan was simple, and the night was quiet. There was a part of me that found hope in the bad news that my family was given. Although both were very difficult scenarios in their own way, I still felt a sense of peace when I was home with my parents that night. Unfortunately, that sense of peace soon turned to panic.

Third bad news: our house was on fire. To top of my parents' already heavy week, why not add a house going up in flames. And not just any house, but a house they lived in for twenty years. And a house they spent the past few years perfecting in order to sell. This added a whole new level of stress to my parents, and I'm somewhat fortunate that I was able to be there for them during that time. That was a true moment of hysteria and fear, and I witnessed my parents in a far different light than any other time growing up. That moment of panic brought out both the best and worst in myself and my parents. What a horrifying experience in the moment, but what an eye-opening story to look back on.

I can recollect almost everything from that night, right down to the smells and facial expressions. Because we agreed on staying in for the night, I was minding my own business on my laptop in front of the fireplace. I was probably procrastinating homework

and trying to keep my mind busy until it was time for bed. I remember my mother circling into the living room multiple times, but I assumed it was her worrisome self just checking in on everything. On her third lap around, she questioned the smell of the house. I didn't really think anything of it because it seemed fairly normal for the house to smell like smoke when the fireplace was burning. I heard my father from the other room validate my thoughts, and he too was not suspicious of any smoke or smell throughout the house. He did not feel the need to call the fire department, and this only made my mother angrier and more anxious. She obviously knew she was not going to get anywhere with my father, so she came back into the living room with me to plead her case. After picking my head up from whatever it was that I was doing, I could truly sense the fear in my mother's eyes. I figured this was another case of her worrying, but I decided to appease her by doing some investigating. For some reason, I felt adventurous and brave. I was going to get to the bottom of whatever was going on, and mediate any angst between my two parents.

I noted that the air seemed smokier than normal, but again, this correlated to the fact that my parents had a fire going all day. When I truly stopped and looked around, the smoke did seem to accumulate in each room more quickly than normal. This is the moment when I started to believe my mother. I definitely felt guilty at first for ignoring her claims, but that sense of guilt quickly washed away as I continued to investigate. This guilt turned into worry and a fear for what might come next. I ran upstairs to check out the attic, and fear grew over me as soon as I opened the door. A thick cloud of smoke climbed over me and I knew my mother was not being dramatic. If anything, she should have ignored my father and called the fire department and dealt with the repercussions

later. Regardless, I ran downstairs as fast as possible to relay the findings to my father. I told him that the smoke was no joke and something was *seriously* wrong. Apparently I had enough credibility that he took my case seriously, so off he went to investigate the attic himself. As he was passing through the kitchen on his way upstairs, he felt some heat across his arm. He looked over and saw haziness along the wall. Panic mode: begin.

There may not have been large flames yet, but we definitely knew what was coming next. We always talk about what to do in case of a fire, but we never actually know what to do in case of a fire until that moment finally comes. My father yelled for us to get out of the house and call 9-1-1, my mother was in hysterics, and I was...unusually calm. I remember seeing my father run next door to get our neighbor's help, and being amazed with his decision-making skills during such a chaotic moment. On the other end of the spectrum was my mother, who was in a full-on panic. We were both yelling across the room to find the animals and put them safely in the car out back. The second I knew our house was on fire, I sprinted downstairs to grab my cat and bring her to safety. I selfishly flew past my mother as she struggled with one of the dogs. After I put the cat in our car, followed up by two dogs that my mother rallied up, I was forced to herd our other extremely overweight, elderly dog into the car. She was almost as frightened as my mother, but luckily I found the strength to somehow pick her up and carry her to the car.

Throughout this whole process of rounding up the animals, my mother was hysterically crying and my father was running around trying to figure out the best option. Neither he nor my neighbor could figure out the fire extinguisher, but I don't really blame them during a chaotic moment like that. They assessed the situation in a hurry and did whatever they could to tame the flames until the fire department showed up. Luckily the

fire started inside the walls, so it hadn't started to spread to the exterior part of the house. I watched my father anxiously, begging him to give me a task so I could help. I was almost too calm, and weirdly up for some sort of challenge during this emergency situation. Obviously there was nothing I could do in that moment to stop a fire that was already rampant, so he sternly told me to just keep an eye on my mother. Oh crap. My mother.

I ran back outside to check on my mother, and the image of her at that exact moment will never leave my mind. The amount of agony in her facial expression was painful, and created almost more panic inside of me than the actual fire did. She was standing next to our neighbor, wrapped in a blanket and sobbing. Between heavy sobs, I could hear her yell out "WHY?" as she stared up at the house in disbelief. I didn't have any answers for her, and I couldn't imagine what was going through her mind at that moment. Of course I was scared, but the need to help my mother was far greater than any fear. The only thing on my mind moving forward was trying to ease my mother's pain. At first, I let her cry and get out any and all emotions. I was there to listen and comfort to the best of my ability. At one point, I even suggested we walk down the street to grab ice cream. Maybe not the best suggestion I have ever come up with, but I was desperate to make my mother feel better. I'm pretty sure my neighbor gave me the dirtiest look when I asked my mother to go get ice cream, but I swear I wasn't being insensitive or craving chocolate! I genuinely was trying to do anything to get my mother's mind off the house. The more she looked at it, the more she wailed out with horror. Again, I tried to do anything in my power to have her avoid her gaze. My consistency paid off, and I finally distracted her enough to slow her breathing down to a normal level.

I calmly went over scenarios and logistics, and even reminded her of our safety as a blessing. The fire department handled the scene so well, and we were lucky enough not to lose everything. I was thankful for my father and his strength, especially with everything that he previously went through that week. His poise throughout that whole situation was quite inspirational, and I am so lucky I was able to witness that side of him. Although we got little sleep in a hotel that night before we departed for Syracuse, my father still remained strong and composed.

The week following the fire was a bit of a blur because the actual fire itself was such a vivid moment. Those emotions were at their truest and rawest forms. I truly believe that how an individual acts during a moment of crisis can paint a complete picture of that person. For me, that person was calm and collected. During a moment of complete and utter chaos, I was able to stay composed and look at the bigger picture. Although I was internally afraid and distressed, I was able to put those emotions aside to look out for those who needed it more than I. By looking back on my temperament during that situation, I now understand that those traits are recurring strengths. During a heightened moment, my qualities came to the forefront. These qualities are something that I should cherish and continue to assess as I grow into a leader both professionally and personally.

As stated earlier, I have a goal of becoming the best leader possible in the world of sport. Though my past experience with a fire had no relevancy to athletics, that moment gave me the opportunity to see myself through a different lens. Rather than constantly being so self-critical and focusing on my weaknesses, that was an eye-opening moment when I realized I do have positive contributions to make. I can set aside any stressors to put the well-being of others above my own. I can remain level-headed during

difficult situations. I can bring humor and positivity to an otherwise unfortunate event. I can be a listening ear for those who need it most. These are just a few of the highlights that a terrible situation uncovered, and I am thankful that I was able to find some positives out of such a negative situation.

As I mentioned above, experiences can help mold and define an individual. Each story has a tale to tell and can give meaning to another experience later on in life. For me, I am now able to look back on that event and truly understand my strengths and what I bring to the table. Moving forward in my career, I can continue to grow and work on these strengths in order to best help those around me. If empowering athletes gives me purpose, then I must first feel empowered by the meaning that my stories bring me. I have been given hope by looking back on my past and building upon those takeaways. Something as simple as giving my mother hope during a time when she had little, or being inspired by the courage my father revealed, can have such a large impact on my perspective. Without those small moments or tiny pieces in my larger puzzle of life, I would not be able to create meaning or hope. These stories of vulnerability have allowed me the chance to find my strength and use them to grow as a female leader. For that reason, I am thankful for all my stories regardless of the intensity

CHAPTER 3: RESILIENCE AS A COACH

3.1 Dear Future Self

Dear Future Self,

I hope by now you have figured out your life and can stop worrying about what is yet to come. Just in case you have lost your mind and cannot remember the past ten

years, let me tell you a little bit about myself at the age of 24. On the surface, I am a pretty relaxed and easy-going young-adult. I'm fairly simple and enjoy good food and good company. It doesn't take much to make me happy, and as long as I still have fresh air to breathe or a tall ice cream cone, I'll be pretty satisfied with my day. Much to my family's surprise, I have somehow managed to survive in a new city for well over a year now. I call my mother on various occasions to ask her how to cook chicken or reset a circuit breaker, but other than that, I swear I am an independent young-adult.

I initially moved to Burlington because an assistant coaching position became available and there was no chance I was going to turn that up. Field hockey was the only thing I knew for the past five years, so finding a 'real job' did not sit so well with me. Four and a half years of undergraduate schooling (or should I say four and a half years of field hockey), prepared me for this. Friends from home think I'm living the dream because I can wear sweatpants to work, have the Summers off, and get to stay involved with the sport I love. Who wouldn't want to be a coach? Boy, are they wrong sometimes.

I can finally admit to myself that this past year (and upcoming year) are harder than I have ever imagined. There is no way I could have anticipated the amount of time and energy I put into this job. Four and a half years of playing field hockey certainly did not prepare me for the level of fatigue that comes from *coaching* field hockey. Some days I feel like I do so much work, and get absolutely nothing in return. On other days, my frustration level is so deep that I don't even know where to begin. I get home from work and want to share this frustration with someone, but there is nobody there to share it with. My boyfriend, who I also consider my best friend, lives in another state. My roommates, a few colleagues who are also complete slobs, are not the most open when it comes to

work problems. I can call my parents or siblings, but they have their own daily pressures to worry about. It looks as though I am alone to face my daily struggles. So now when I arrive home from work, I grab a few bites of ice cream and do some homework before I go to bed, envying the friends of mine who still live together and have their daily laughs. Why can't life be that simple for me?

I'm sure you are probably starting to think that I am completely mad for living here and coaching if so many negative feelings come from it. Sometimes I start to think that I am mad too, but then there is something in my gut telling me to push through this current struggle of mine. After a tough first year of loneliness and penny-pinching, I found that schooling is helping me to find meaning. After making the decision to start graduate school, things in my life started to make sense. I now have a reason for my constant stresses and struggles, because I know that the end result will make up for the often mundane journey. I have now started to look at things from different perspectives and create a purpose for the things I am doing. Sure, coaching is a full-time job with part-time pay, but the lessons and experiences I am gaining are things that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Hopefully you can attest to those lessons, and I'm assuming you still use some of those experiences to get through whatever struggles you are dealing with in your life now.

Currently, I am learning to struggle and work through growing pains, while working toward a future that means something to me. My relationship with my boyfriend is hard at times, but we appreciate each other more than ever because of the distance we face. Most nights I long to see him and feel his warmth, but the faith in our relationship and each other help us to get through the tough times. Knowing I have a caring soul-mate

to create a life with gives me the confidence to keep pushing through. I hope that you, my future self, has continued to appreciate the love that he provides.

In regards to my vocation, I have come to find that the reason I was first drawn to coaching is because of the impact that leaders can have on an individual's life. It isn't necessarily the sport or coaching aspect that I like, but rather the lessons and relationships I can help to create for these young adults. My past experience as a collegiate athlete helped me to appreciate life in so many ways, and being able to share my wisdom with similar individuals has given me meaning thus far. More specifically, being able to hold a leadership role in a position outside of coaching would allow me to use these skills to help athletes develop on a more personal level outside their sport. College is a time period of self-discovery and identity exploration, so being able to aid in this process is something that truly gives me meaning.

Although I am only a few years older than some of my players, my past experiences as a collegiate athlete have helped shape me into the person I am today. More specifically, the moments when mentors pushed me to be vulnerable and test my limits are the memories that I cherish today. One of the most vivid memories I have is when my previous coach, Steve, would put out his fist to us either before or after the game. The reason this simple gesture had such an impact was because Steve was very misunderstood in the coaching world, but did not let that hold him back from showing his players how much he cared. He did not possess many of the ordinary Division I coaching characteristics, but yet he had a way to capture and inspire his athletes.

Steve was obsessed with his cat, was a little overweight, and spoke in a coaching language that took everyone a few weeks (some months) to understand. He challenged

everyone and forced us to be creative. The head coach, in comparison, coached us into robots and was extremely disciplined and consistent. Steve, however, had this big belly-laugh that would snap us out of our robotic and monotonous play, helping us to become better players and people. Through the stressful practices and games, Steve would be there to give us confidence and remind us of why we played the sport in the first place. He didn't need to say much, but would show us with passion and gentle gestures. Nothing can replace the thoughts and feelings of Steve placing his fist on my shoulder to let me know I played well, and most importantly, to let me know he cared.

The story of Steve is in my heart more than ever now. A player on my team was recently given the news that her mother has roughly five months to live. Five months. I can't even begin to imagine the thoughts and feelings she is having, nor can I relate. But what I do know is how I can bring Steve with me to show her that I care, and that I am always behind her. In the bigger game of life, the tactics of field hockey do not matter. I do not remember the plays we ran back when I was a player, but rather the moments when people inspired me to be great. Through these recent events, I know that I want to be the person who inspires people to be great regardless of the many curveballs life throws at them. I want to be the person who encourages people to take risks and be creative, because why not? If I can risk my finances, my relationship, my social life, why can't I encourage people to also take risks if it means they will find a greater meaning? For me right now, life isn't about living the most satisfying life and getting everything I truly hope for and desire. Because let's be honest...that is not going to happen for some time now. I understand that I need to work toward my career and go through schooling while gaining experience. I understand that my boyfriend and I need to do what is right

for ourselves first, before we pick up and move or make a sacrifice. It is a process, and the process isn't always pretty. I do believe that the finish line won't be pretty, but rather something beautiful. So for now, I am focused on learning how to be better for others, and not for myself. I believe that through this paradox, through this process, I will grow as an individual and develop that meaning to satisfy my life.

The irony behind this entire development is that I did not truly understand my meaning until I took the time to sit down and genuinely think about my purpose. While reading Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* I came across the quote, "but everything great is just as difficult to realize as it is rare to find." It is no wonder that few people are actually satisfied with their careers, relationships, and lives. The inner and outer happiness are hard to balance and create, and while I am in the midst of this exploration, I find that this journey is both challenging and rewarding. I believe that through paradoxical intention, I am able to not only help others, but also help myself create meaning. After I heard the news about my player's mother, I had an epiphany while driving. The past year I was so focused on *my* struggles, *my* happiness, and *my* next move. With this epiphany, I realized that I feel happiest when I am helping others grasp their struggles or their strengths. I am naturally a selfless person, so why should I not be using this to my benefit? I have this great opportunity of not only coaching, but also taking graduate classes and learning about meaning-making. I started out by focusing on how *I* could be making meaning, when I should have been learning about how to help my players find meaning in whatever they are doing. I am certain that this has something to do with my purpose, and I'm sure you can (hopefully) attest to that now.

Circling back to my original thought, I do hope that your worries are gone and your mind is now clear. As my future self, I am assuming you will have a little more wisdom than I do now, so hopefully you have met my current hopes and dreams. Obviously, as you can tell from my previous rant, I am not too worried about finding a purpose. What I do wish for you, however, is to continue finding purpose in your daily activities, and using this to continue being happy. I have spent far too many days worrying and stressing out about what my future holds, and I do not want you spending the rest of your life going through the same thing. Life will throw many different things your way, as you probably realize, so be sure to find some sort of meaning out of those various situations.

To close off my ramblings, I want to thank you for your patience and perseverance (or at least I'm assuming you're still patient). I hope you find some humor in reading about my pointless worries, and I hope you find irony in my current situation as you continue to bask in happiness!

Yours truly,

Melyssa From the Past

3.2 Authenticity in my World of Sport

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not the most experienced coach and yes, I do understand that I've only been doing this for three years now. However, I have learned in these past three years that coaching as a profession can teach one so much about herself. For me personally, the vulnerability that takes place during coaching has played a huge role in my authenticity as a leader moving forward. We all know that one quote about

playing sports that says ‘sports do not build character- they reveal it.’ Well the same can be said for coaching a sport. Whether it is during a competition with heightened emotions, or during the monotonous day-to-day activities, coaching can reveal the truest self on all spectrums. For this reason, among many others, sport is the world in which I will forever live. My truest, most authentic self lives in this competitive world. Although I have fought this idea for many years, I know that I would not be doing myself justice if I were to walk away from this diverse and competitive world.

So why sport? Why out of the plethora of *hobbies*, if you must, was I drawn to the competitive world of athletics? Maybe it’s the family atmosphere created in a department. Or better yet, maybe it’s the idea of being around such motivated and active individuals. Whatever the reason, I’m here now to stay. And with that, comes an obligation. An obligation to not only venture on a personal and professional meaning-making quest, but to also be an authentic role-model to everyone I touch throughout the world of sport. I cannot stress enough how important the role of a coach is on an athlete’s life, so this chapter is meant to explore the influence of positive mentors and leaders in an athlete’s life. Conversely, I will also explore the value in vulnerability as a coach in creating that positive relationship with an athlete to better serve his/her needs. Now although my experience only extends to 25 years of life, I feel strongly that my experiences and stories will help serve as a guide to the importance of vulnerability in the coach-athlete working relationship. By using Scholarly Personal Narrative, I hope to shine light on the importance of my own authenticity throughout my process of becoming a leader.

3.3 The Power of Words

I get knocked down, but I get up again. - Chumbawamba

*Zephyr in the sky at night I wonder,
Do my tears of mourning sink beneath the sun. –Madonna*

As a young athlete, I understood the importance of discipline and challenging oneself in order to get better. After getting my feet wet in just about every sport under the sun, I started to narrow down my specialty sports so I could really focus on improving those skills. Although my parents probably secretly wished I stuck with ballet instead of ice hockey to save some money, I preferred the fast-paced team sports that would continuously challenge me. By middle school I knew my strengths and passions, so I made the executive decision to focus on field hockey, ice hockey, and lacrosse. This would give me the ability to cross-train in like-minded sports while also staying active each season.

Because I had been playing ice hockey for three years prior, picking up the sport of field hockey during gym class in 6th grade was seamless. My stick skills were already developed, and I started to also enjoy the tactical side of the game. When I tried out for the middle school team the next year in 7th grade, I found myself on the “A” team. Although I do not remember much from that season, I do remember the encouragement and positivity that our coach had. I felt that this specific coach truly cared about keeping us interested in the sport, and not so much about the results of the game. Obviously middle-school sports are meant to be more about having fun and less about winning, but

nowadays that is rarely the case. Still, I felt that without her encouragement to improve every single day, I would not have continued the sport. This goes to show just how important words, and the relationships that are created through these ongoing conversations, are in an athlete's life.

After the season ended that year, I was sold on the sport of field hockey. My excitement grew for the next year and I was already anticipating my off-season work. Luckily, our school offered free weeknight sessions inside during the winter. Playing inside on a smooth surface allowed my stick skills to develop even more, and I could truly sense my improvement throughout the year. This hard work and improvement paid off the next season going into 8th grade. The varsity coach approached myself and one other classmate, asking us to tryout for the varsity team. Me? An 8th grader who has yet to go through puberty? After my initial shock and feelings of disbelief, my parents encouraged me to challenge myself and tryout. The worst thing that could happen, they expressed, was to not make the squad and be put back down on the middle-school team like everyone else in my grade. There were no expectations so I figured I should give it my best shot.

Because I was not enrolled in high school yet, I had to go through a series of tests to make sure I was physically ready to compete against older students. This included various strength and cardio tests to ensure my fitness-level would keep me safe. On top of the physical tests, which I passed with flying colors, I also had to answer several questions to ensure my 'mental' maturity. In order to compete at the varsity level, if one was not enrolled in high school yet, an athlete had to have matriculated. Because I had not yet gone through menstruation, but so dearly wanted to tryout for varsity, I lied about

having my period. The school nurse probably knew I made up those lies, but this (un)ethical decision made sense to me if I wanted to pursue my passion. I was now able to tryout for the high school team, and that gave me such an intense feeling of pride. This feeling of pride is one of the many reasons that I even got involved in sport in the first place, and why I cannot foresee myself ever walking away from it.

Long story short: I made varsity as an 8th grader. I was a little nervous to be playing with seniors in high school, but I maintained focus on my love for the sport. The upperclassmen were intimidating at times, but still extremely encouraging. I can't imagine it is very fun to have an 8th grader be playing over you at times, but the players appreciated by drive and never took it out on me. Because I was younger and inexperienced, the coach rarely took things out on me or had too high of expectations that could not be met. I finished my second season of field hockey feeling encouraged yet again. The fall season quickly became my favorite time of year, and I couldn't wait for my next four years of high school field hockey. That feeling, unfortunately, quickly started to lose its passion.

For whatever reason, my high school coach started to change her affect toward me once I entered high school. Although I never stopped working hard or trying to prove myself, the coach seemed to have a differing viewpoint about me. This leads me into my overall point—the influence of a leader on an athlete has far greater meaning that one would initially think. For this reason, a role-model, leader and coach must always be 'on'. An athlete, much like myself, is a sponge for any information and guidance in his/her respective sport. Although I consider myself a tough individual, I am also somewhat sensitive and take things to heart, especially from those who are in leadership roles to me.

I didn't realize just how important words could be until I found myself in a coaching role. Now as a coach, I often reflect on past experiences and try to understand how these affected me as a player and now, as a leader. I can remember vividly one practice when that same high school coach took advantage of her leadership role and used her words to put me down. She (verbatim) told me that I had 'tree trunks for legs'. Regardless of her intention, or whether or not this statement was actually true, that was a stab directly toward my self-esteem. Not only was that completely irrelevant at the moment, but what could possibly be the purpose of saying that out loud in front of players? Luckily I was secure enough to let the comment roll off my back, but it still left me questioning her future intentions and authenticity as a coach. From that moment on, her comments only got worse and I started to distance myself from her. I especially lost trust in her as a coach when she told me I lacked integrity. I lacked integrity? Integrity was something I prided myself in. How could someone meant to guide female athletes say something so insensitive?

Looking back, this is such a sad reality. A coach should be someone you look up to and go to for advice and mentorship. Although those comments left me puzzled, I used those as fuel to work even harder in my sport so I could play in college and gain a better experience. I may have had the strength to use those negative comments and turn it into something positive, but many other young females do not have the same tools to adapt. The need to adapt can be completely avoided in the first place if coaches choose to use their words to *empower*, rather than deny an athlete. Similar to lyrics in a song, words can have a greater effect on an individual than initially intended. Tumbthumping by Chumbawamba, for example, may have been about going out and drinking after a night

of protesting. For me, however, that song represented determination and motivation to fight through adversity. Chumbawamba's intention probably wasn't meant to give me hope, but that is how I chose to use that song. Similarly, the intention of my coach's harsh words (hopefully) weren't meant to hurt me. Unfortunately, belittling comments, such as those, are often taken in that direction.

As a coach and leader, these negative connotations are something you constantly need to be aware of. Although those comments hurt my self-esteem back then, I am thankful that I was given that experience to learn from and use as ammunition for my current leadership style. Back then, I didn't know how important a positive relationship with a coach could be in one's personal and professional development. With encouragement from one coach and cynicism from another, I tried to find some semblance of balance in my own unique, authentic coaching style. Through trial and error, several deferring experiences, and support from the *positive* role-models, I started to find out how authenticity could help me lead.

3.4 Vulnerability in Coaching

*It is not the critic who counts;
not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles,
or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.*

*The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;
who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again,*

*because there is no effort without error and short-coming;
but who does actually strive to do the deeds;
who knows great enthusiasm, the great devotions;
who spends himself in a worthy cause;

who at the best knows in the end the triumph
of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails,
at least fails while **daring greatly**...*
-Theodore Roosevelt

The idea of complete vulnerability and openness has always terrified me a bit. I am a very reserved and introverted person, so how am I supposed to put myself out there? Although this idea of vulnerability is quite scary, I have also come to realize that this is how individuals grow. Especially in regard to coaching, being able to show your authentic self is how athletes gain trust and respect. Without being true to oneself and feeling vulnerable, just like athletes do at times, the idea of ‘mentoring’ will never exist. Throughout my meaning-making process, I have looked to past experiences with vulnerability to dive into how I could better myself as a leader in athletics. Specifically, the moments when mentors pushed me to be vulnerable and test my limits are the memories that I continue to cherish today.

One of the most vivid memories surrounding this topic is when I was a collegiate field hockey player. My previous coach at the time, Steve, would put out his fist to us either before or after a game. The reason this simple gesture had such an impact was because Steve was very misunderstood in the coaching world, but did not let that hold him back from showing his players how much he cared. He did not possess many of the

ordinary Division I coaching characteristics, yet he had a way to capture and inspire his athletes. He was bold, vulnerable, and stayed authentic no matter what challenges he faced.

Steve was obsessed with his cat, was a little overweight, and spoke in a coaching language that took everyone a few weeks (some months) to understand. He challenged everyone and forced us to be creative—something which was far different from the head coach. She coached us into robots, while being extremely disciplined and consistent. Steve, however, had this big belly-laugh that would snap us out of our robotic and monotonous play, helping us to become better players and people. During stressful practices and games, Steve would be there to give us confidence and remind us of why we played the sport in the first place. He didn't need to say much, but would show us with passion and gentle gestures. Nothing can replace the thoughts and feelings of Steve placing his fist on my shoulder to let me know I played well, and most importantly, to let me know he cared.

The story of Steve is in my heart more than ever now. As I try to navigate my way through the world of athletics, this story is a quiet reminder that being courageous and staying true to yourself are the best ways to ensure respect amongst your team. I think the significance of staying authentic is to help yourself create meaning. Without a complete understanding of your individual authenticity, how are you supposed to help others find theirs? The irony behind this entire development about authenticity is that I did not truly understand my meaning until I took the time to sit down and genuinely think about my

purpose. While reading Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* I came across the quote, "but everything great is just as difficult to realize as it is rare to find."⁹

It is no wonder that few people are actually satisfied with their careers, relationships, and lives. The inner and outer happiness are hard to balance and create, and while I am in the midst of this exploration, I find that this journey is both challenging and rewarding. I believe that through paradoxical intention, I am able to not only help others, but also help myself create meaning. This in turn has helped me relate to athletes and continue to lead with integrity, all while being a positive role-model in their lives. I may not always have answers for their questions, but I can confidently say I will try to be the best version of myself and consistently lead by example.

Now that I have examined how someone else's vulnerability has affected my leadership, you must be thinking what a paradox it is that I haven't mentioned an experience when *I* felt vulnerable. To be completely honest, I have felt somewhat vulnerable during most of my coaching experience. I want so badly to be the best role-model for these athletes, so I often find myself being much too reserved. I always find it somewhat distracting to talk about my feelings with current players, so I tried to maintain a 'professional' role with the athletes. It wasn't until one of my players tore her ACL before the season that I let my guard down. This was something I was familiar with and I empathized with her struggle. Especially as someone who puts her heart and soul into a program, much like I did when I tore my ACL in college, a season-ending injury like that can take a toll on someone's mentality. Because I am a reserved person, most of the players on the team had no idea I tore my ACL during college just a few years back.

⁹ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006),

Although I didn't ever talk about that experience beforehand, it was something that deeply affected my outlook on life. During that time period, I started to question my purpose in life and really tried to understand the importance of staying present. Because of my player's injury, I decided to talk about that personal struggle. I was finally honest with myself and opened up without any worry about judgments. This may seem like a small task that isn't classified as vulnerable to someone else, but for me this took a lot of bravery. It wasn't often that I let my guard down and talked about my emotions or feelings with players. Although that moment was challenging, and talking about my feelings with a player was uncomfortable, I am grateful that I pushed myself to be vulnerable. I realized that a leader doesn't always need to be guarded to affirm her strong leadership qualities. A strong female leader is actually someone who is authentic and not afraid to make mistakes because of vulnerability. The mentors who I respected most growing up, like Steve, are the role-models who showed vulnerability and remained honest in their own skin. I am now a strong believer in authentic leadership and facing vulnerability head-on throughout my personal and professional development as a leader.

CHAPTER 4: RESILIENCE AS A FEMALE LEADER IN ATHLETICS

4.1 Dear Jim

Dear Jim,

I hate this. I hate that we still haven't taken the next step in our relationship. I hate that our long distance relationship just got longer. I hate that we are constantly trying to start a life together while being apart. I hate this paradox we are in. I get home from work and these are my thoughts. As I cook dinner for one, I often ask myself if this relationship

is worth it. I get so angry and discouraged by the fact that we haven't been able to take that next step. This is hard and I hate it. I hate not being able to come home from a long day at work and classes to see you. I hate waking up to a cold and empty bed. I hate going weeks without any physical touch or intimacy. I hate not being able to enjoy your company every day. I hate that on top of already feeling sad, my mother constantly urges me to essentially drop what I'm doing to be with you.

But that is why love is greater than hate. Although this distance is tougher than I wanted to admit, I love that it's for a reason. I love that you support me in my endeavors. I love that you are able to pursue your passions. I love that we support each other equally. I love that we can make sacrifices in order to further our careers. I love that you give my hopes and dreams as much, if not more, support than your own. I love that you respect my passion for sport and leadership. I love that you want me to be able to focus on myself and not have that be seen as something selfish. I love that you bring optimism to my life in lieu of our distance. This gives me hope, and I love you more that. Having to prove myself in a male-dominated profession is hard enough as it is, and adding the stress of this unidealistic relationship only makes it harder. But your kindness and sincerity gives me hope for not only my future, but our future.

With Love,
Melyssa

4.2 Leadership Development Plan

I'm about to make a very bold statement. **Women are tough.** And when I say tough I mean strong, resilient, and fearless. This is one of the many reasons I love the

world of college sport. Although females are marginalized in this setting, the amount of inspiration and heart they provide to sport is undeniable. I have witnessed female athletic administrators raise each other up and support one another in hopes to make the world of sport a more compassionate and competitive place. With the rise of female administrators, I have also witnessed the rise of more supportive male administrators. This not only provides me with hope for my future as a leader, but also gives me a sense of belonging. I have wasted so much time being discouraged or focusing on things outside of my control, but with the inspiration from other strong female leaders, I have learned to trust my process. Part of this process has been developing a better sense of self and becoming more vulnerable. After going to several women's leadership seminars and events, I decided to develop a leadership plan in order to fully engage myself in the process. Part of vulnerability is being able to take an honest look at yourself and use that self-reflection as an opportunity to grow. For that reason, I wish to share with you my ongoing leadership development plan:

Twenty-four years ago, my journey into the the multifaceted concept of leadership began. I was born into a family that honored a high level of core values and ethics, and I made a conscious decision at a young age to uphold these high standards in whatever life events I may come across. I found myself often relying on my integrity when faced with tough decisions, and this idea has only strengthened with time. As I continued to age and fulfill more permanent leadership positions throughout my life, I realized that this integrity is what helped guide my leadership development. While learning that leadership is a

continual process, I have begun to reflect on my leadership characteristics and inevitably create my own unique style that I can use to present myself as a leader.

The motivational speaker Brian Tracey once stated that, “Integrity is the most valuable and respected quality of leadership. Always keep your word.”

Similar to Tracy, I have always been a fond believer in conveying my leadership with honesty and respect. Not only have I developed a sense of honesty with myself, but also with my peers, colleagues, and subordinates in the workplace.

Because leadership involves working with other individuals, developing relationships with others is an unavoidable task. For this reason, my relationships with others have helped me to create a more inclusive and respectful leadership style. Throughout my time in collegiate athletics, I have had the chance to look at my style more closely and really critique the many components involved.

Although the strengths in my leadership style revolve around integrity, there are still some flaws in my development that I hope to improve. Through the detailed exploration of the many facets leadership can hold, I am continuing on my journey of leadership development to help better myself for any future leadership roles.

When it comes to motivation in certain situations, I believe that having passion in one’s work is the best way to transform people and motivate them to work toward a common goal. Northouse (2013) states that, “Transformational leadership is the process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and

the follower” (186).¹⁰ My integrity and strong moral values help increase confidence not only within myself, but my followers, as well. This Transformational Leadership is a strength in the way I present myself to others, and my inspiration to be the best possible version of myself everyday hopefully speaks to my followers and stimulates them to also be better. This passion and motivation also helps to make me feel more authentic and true to myself, which gives my subordinates trust in our goals as a unit.

The ability to be authentic and real is essential in order to have individuals connect with you and accept your goals and values. James Autry (2001) states that, “Being authentic is first, knowing yourself, then being yourself. Authenticity derives from our deepest, truest selves” (p. 13).¹¹ Since leadership is a process and constantly developing, I find myself always working to better myself as a human being first and foremost, so I can be confident when leading others. I believe that because I am true and authentic with myself, I have developed a sense of self-confidence. I consider this authenticity and self-confidence as strengths in the way I present myself as a leader to others. I believe that because I am constantly looking at both my strengths and my weaknesses, people find me more relatable because I can accept feedback. Especially as an assistant field hockey coach, it is important for me to relate to the athletes in a way that allows them to feel comfortable and trust the decisions I make. If I choose to be fake and distance

¹⁰ Northouse, Peter Guy. 2013. *Leadership Theory And Practice*. 6th ed. Los Angeles: Sage.

¹¹ Autry, James A. 2004. *The Servant Leader*. 1st ed. New York: Three Rivers Press.

myself from the athletes, then there would never be a relationship established to build our goals upon.

Although I consider one of my strengths to be authenticity, I often struggle with the idea of vulnerability. Because I am a fairly young coach and administrator with little experience compared to those in a similar position, trying to establish myself as a strong leader comes with many difficulties. One of those difficulties, and a weakness I am trying to combat, is risk-taking and vulnerability. According to Brene Brown (2012), “To reignite creativity, innovation, and learning, leaders must re-humanize education and work. This means understanding how scarcity is affecting the way we lead and work, learning how to engage with vulnerability, and recognizing and combating shame” (184).¹² This idea has really spoken to me as both a person and a leader, because I have come to define leaders as people who hold themselves accountable for finding the potential in others and the manner in which they conduct themselves. Leadership is a process, as I mentioned earlier, and through vulnerability and risk-taking, leadership will develop. Because I am innately a shy individual, others would describe my leadership style as ‘leading by example’. I have become more vocal throughout the past year, but my actions speak louder than my words. I believe that this can be considered a strength because followers feed off of my actions, and this self-confidence motivates them.

Although leading by example is a positive trait, I also recognize that a weakness of mine is the inability to demand at certain moments. According to

¹² Brown, Brene. 2015. *Daring Greatly*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Avery Publishing Group.

Zaleznik (1992), "Leadership inevitably requires using power to influence the thoughts and actions of other people" (p. 2).¹³ With that being said, sometimes I lack this power, or demandingness, from my subordinates. I am at times too concerned with gaining their respect or trust, so I forget that occasionally it may be necessary to demand from followers in a proactive manner. This lack in assertiveness is something that I am working on as both a female, and a leader. Although I am naturally seen as a leader to my athletes, due to my role as a coach, I need to be willing to grow in this area if I wish to find a leadership position outside of coaching. I recently attended a Women in Leadership Summit where the speakers encouraged female leaders to remain confident throughout their struggles. Assertive females are often seen in a negative way (compared to their male counterparts), so this willingness to demand from others in order to motivate and reach a common goal is extremely important in my leadership development.

These past few years have been extremely beneficial in my leadership development. I have allowed myself the chance to reflect on both my strengths and weaknesses as a coach and a leader. Through personal reflection and assessment activities, I have begun to understand my positive qualities as a leader. Although my strengths as a leader stem back to integrity, I also understand the challenges that I am faced with when trying to grow as a leader. As I previously mentioned, my vocal presence and assertiveness are two things that I find myself constantly looking to improve. I have been working with mentors and using

¹³ Zaleznick, Abraham. 1992. "Managers And Leaders: Are They Different?". *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2004/01/managers-and-leaders-are-they-different>.

personal reflection to develop myself into a better leader each and every day. Zaleznik (1992) stresses the importance of relationships with mentors and apprentices because, “These close working relationships encourage intense emotional interchange, tolerance of competitive impulses, and eagerness to challenge ideas—essential characteristics of leadership” (p. 1).¹⁴ For that reason, I believe that both good and bad feedback is essential in order to develop throughout the process of leadership.

One of my mentors stressed the importance of feedback and self-reflections during the leadership development process. This female mentor—a strong and relational leader—passionately expressed that the leadership process is a constant dissertation of yourself. She emphasized the importance of receiving critical feedback, while also constantly being aware of your own leadership plan and style. Between the combination of feedback and self-work, you can constantly assess your development as you go through different experiences. This bit of advice is what has motivated me to reach the top of my leadership potential. For that reason, I have started on this journey of leadership development and hope to continually grow my skills.

Authenticity and connectivity are two strengths that I hope to continually build upon throughout this development process. With that being said, my plan of self-reflection and self-work is already in the process. In order to develop my strengths, I plan to ask for hard feedback in whatever ways I can. Along with that, I plan to immerse myself into any reading materials or lectures that I think could

¹⁴ Zaleznick, Abraham. 1992. "Managers And Leaders: Are They Different?". *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2004/01/managers-and-leaders-are-they-different>.

benefit my learning. Joe Ehrmann, a former All-American football player, emphasizes the importance of the *why*, especially in regards to coaching or mentoring student-athletes. More specifically, the question of *why* can help an individual begin to lead with an actual purpose.¹⁵ This purpose is something that I plan to focus on throughout my development, and I will actually take note of my values and what gives me purpose when leading.

Another way I plan to develop my skills as a leader is to look at the ways I can separate myself when it comes to adversity. I have learned that one of the challenges leaders face today is having enough, or the appropriate, resources. Throughout my discussions with peers and mentors, I have learned that (especially in athletics) resources and opportunities may not always be present. According to Stone (1988), “Equality may in fact mean inequality; equal treatment may require unequal treatment; and the same distribution may be seen as equal or unequal, depending on one’s point of view” (41).¹⁶ For this reason, part of my plan in leadership development is to constantly be doing research on the organization I am involved in so I have knowledge on ways I can rise above any of these issues. By understanding the core values and mission of an organization, I plan to look at things from different perspectives in order to understand how equality and resources can best benefit everyone. Along with that, I plan to develop a core sense of values surrounding my own opinions on

¹⁵ Jordan, Gregory, Paula Ehrmann, and Joe Ehrmann. 2014. *Insideout Coaching*. 1st ed. New York: Simon & Schuster.

¹⁶ Stone, Deborah A. 1988. *Policy Paradox*. 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

equality. This will enable me to be prepared for any issues regarding opportunity or (lack of) resources, and rise above these challenges.

The last way I plan to develop my leadership style is to look at my weaknesses and overcome these challenges. More specifically, I am focusing on being more vulnerable and becoming susceptible to taking risks. According to Goleman and Boyatzis (2002), “Great leadership works through emotions” (3) and “Followers also look to a leader for supportive emotional connection—for empathy” (5).¹⁷ Although I feel that I exemplify strong empathic qualities, it has also been a struggle of mine to not be so serious. By letting my guard down and being vulnerable, I will be able to connect to others on a much better level. I plan to do this slowly and by taking small risks each week to show others that I am more similar than not. I believe that this is an important quality that results in trust and respect, so I am planning on making a constant effort in this area.

Documenting my small successes will only enable me to take more risks, so I hope to use this as a way to develop my leadership into something greater.

As a leader, I believe that I lead by example and exemplify strong characteristics of integrity. I am authentic in nature, but also continuing to grow with my vulnerability and risk-taking. I let my strong morals and values guide my decision-making, and I believe that this helps me continue to grow as a leader.

Leadership is a process and this development can constantly be challenged, so I plan to self-reflect and look for ways to improve my weaknesses and sharpen my

¹⁷ Goleman, D., & Boyatzis, R. (2002). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.

strengths. I have been fortunate enough to learn about different leadership theories, and I am proud to say that I have already started to implement them into my life. I hope to one day pursue a higher leadership role in athletics, and I am confident that I now have the knowledge to help me get to that point.

CHAPTER 5: WHY VULNERABILITY MATTERS

5.1 Dear Robert

Dear Robert,

I just want to start off by saying how grateful I am for your compassion and support throughout these past two years. This program, headed by your philosophical and caring spirit, has encouraged me to feel comfortable being uncomfortable. I am beyond thankful for this opportunity to be a part of the Interdisciplinary Studies program, and I have learned more about myself these past two years than I have my entire lifetime. I owe my newfound appreciation for deep reflection and the power of words to you and this program. There are not enough words in the English dictionary to express my gratitude, so hopefully this will suffice.

Two years ago, I made the decision to continue my education and pursue my Masters degree at the University of Vermont. After researching several programs and discussing my options with mentors and those close to me, I landed on the Interdisciplinary Studies program. The thought of a flexible program really appealed to me. Not only because of my busy schedule, but also because I wasn't sold on what career path I wanted to take in the future. Of course I had a general idea of what my passions were and the areas of work that I was drawn to, but this was a way to really hone in on

those interests. The idea of taking classes that interested me, rather than becoming part of a strict cohort, truly fascinated me. Was I really in charge of my own program? Was this program even legitimate? I thought graduate school was supposed to be disciplined and routine. Thankfully, those hesitations and doubts were cleared up when I first met with you for our “interview” at Chef’s Corner.

My dream of going to graduate school was quickly becoming a reality, and so were all the stressors that went along with it. For starters, my internal dialogue (in a span of two minutes) went something like this: “What do I wear on this interview? Wait, is this even an interview? If this is an interview, then why is it at a café? Will we recognize each other when we get there? Do I bring a notebook with my next two years planned out and all my goals that align with this program? Should I start thinking of book titles in case he asks me what my favorite book is? Wait, do I even know what my favorite book is?...”

As you can imagine, this dialogue went on for quite some time. As nervous as I was leading up to that meeting, I was instantly calmed when I met you. I couldn’t believe that someone as laid back as you was the director of a graduate program, and not to mention someone who held multiple degrees. I honestly just assumed tenured professors in higher education were serious and arrogant. However, this meeting was a pleasant surprise and dismantled any doubts I once had about pursuing this degree. Your humble, yet confident nature transferred over to me. I immediately felt welcomed and supported as both a scholar and a human being. The confidence grew inside me, and I felt a great sense of hope when I left the meeting that morning.

Fast forward a few months and that will bring you to my first day of class. My mannerisms regressed to my Freshman-year-in-undergrad self. I was overly prepared for class and eager to learn. The nerves started to get the best of me, so I arrived probably twenty minutes early to my Philosophy of Education class. There was one other person in the classroom, so I nervously asked her if she was here for the same class. After several minutes of tense small talk about the program and our expectations, another classmate walked in. She immediately started to organize the chairs into a circle and exclaimed, “This must be your first class with Robert.”

The other classmate and I looked at each other in confusion. I wasn’t sure what that statement meant, but I soon realized I would be unable to hide in the back row. This quickly became a reality and the next thing I knew, we were going around in a circle introducing ourselves to the entire group. I felt my voice tremble as I gave my name and occupation. The next order of business was to let the class know why you enrolled in that course. Through my shaky voice, I’m pretty sure I just told the class some bogus answer because I was too uncomfortable to say anything else. Little did I know, that “bogus” answer was actually quite true and accurate. I simply wanted to be a part of that class, and the Interdisciplinary Studies program in general, to explore my meaning-making. I was ready to be vulnerable and challenge myself in a different way than I had in the past. Sure, I was already mentally and physically resilient because of my athletic background, but had I *truly* let my guard down before? At that point in my life, vulnerability was something I was prepared to explore. I was ready to let my guard down and feel vulnerable, and I would not have been able to discover those emotions if it were not for you and this program.

With vulnerability there also comes shame, discouragement, and unworthiness. Although we hate to see those things come up, it is often inevitable when coming across uncharted territories. Personally, I have felt those things more than once. For whatever reason, I have a great sense of pressure that is placed on myself. Sure, my parents had high expectations for me, as did my coaches, but that isn't nearly as bad as the expectations I place on myself. These past two years I have learned that I am incredibly hard on myself, and although wanting to be the best version of myself is fine, it is also fine to give myself a break every once in a while. For someone who is relatively confident on a daily basis, I must also have a slight case of the Imposter Syndrome. You, among many others, might ask 'why?'. If I knew the answer to that, this program probably would not have been as impactful or beneficial as it was. It is through your program where I have started to once again believe in myself and be okay with taking risks. With these risks come many uncomfortable and unfamiliar situations, which inevitably leads to personal growth.

Not only was I able to fight this Imposter Syndrome through the writing in your classes, but also by taking outside courses in different subject areas. I vividly remember being shocked by the high grade I was given in a Public Administration course at the end of one semester. I was the only one in class who was not part of the MPA program, so you can imagine my discouragement during the first day of class introductions. There were individuals who worked in government, large corporations, non-profits, and several other public or private sector organizations. They clearly had experience and knowledge. I immediately felt intimidated and out of my league. But why? Just because I'm a coach and work in an athletic department doesn't mean I am any less than those individuals. My

grade at the end of the semester proved that, and going through that process was extremely eye-opening. If I challenged myself and remained confident, then clearly I was not an imposter. I probably learned more about myself through that class than the actual material itself, but that is perfectly fine with me. This journey, after all, was about searching for my meaning and letting myself feel vulnerable.

My last course of the program, Scholarly Personal Narrative, is one that I'm sure I will never forget. As you may recall, this class was one where I probably showed the most vulnerability. I admitted multiple times that writing wasn't in my interests, and I constantly felt discouraged by the process of writing my thesis. I'm sure hearing a student who was taking a course specifically for writing tell you they didn't like writing isn't the most pleasant thing to hear. I do apologize for telling you this. Throughout that final course, I realized that my displeasure for writing comes from the vulnerability that follows. The act of writing, specifically scholarly personal narrative, truly forces me to put my guard down. I hate that. I absolutely hate having words flow out and feeling disappointed. I hate the emotions that are drawn out of me when I begin to write something so personal. And I hate that it takes great lengths for me to get to this point of vulnerability.

It wasn't until our very last class where I was truly 100% honest with myself. As you may recall, I broke down pretty significantly. Although I felt confident in the structural components of SPN writing, the amount of disappointment I felt trumped any self-confidence I once had. Looking back on that moment, I find it extremely interesting that I didn't feel any embarrassment after I finished bawling my eyes out. In most emotional situations, I would feel uneasy about my vulnerability. But that moment was

different. I felt completely real and honest. I didn't hold back my emotions or censor any of my truest thoughts. I didn't feel the need to put on a front and display positivity. I was discouraged and disappointed in several aspects of my writing, but that didn't need to be a bad thing. I think acknowledging my discouragement is what helped me grow in that specific situation. That moment led to my own internal acceptance.

What a whirlwind of emotions and events these past two years have been. People say that time flies when you're having fun, but I think time goes by more quickly when you are learning. And boy, have I learned. Not only have I learned so much about myself, but I have learned far more from the individuals whom I shared classes with. Human beings are unique species because of the universalizability that is shared. So many emotions can be evoked by sharing stories, and this is the greatest takeaway I have from the Interdisciplinary Studies program. We all have our suffering or proud moments, and the fact that humans can relate to others' experiences is amazing. Regardless of similarities or differences, feelings of empathy can be drawn out of individuals through story. Stories of classmates have touched my heart and soul so deeply that I have shown emotions I did not know were possible. This is the beauty of SPN writing. If more people shared their stories, the world would be a more empathetic and understanding place.

I'm not entirely sure if this makes sense or illustrates my takeaways from the program, but I hope it at least sheds some light on my gratefulness for you and this program. I would like to end this paper by cordially thanking you for your guidance and support. Your acceptance has been truly inspirational, and I hope you understand just how important it is for the world to have people like you in it. I will always have a soft spot in my heart for you because your view on the world and humanity is full of

compassion. My one regret throughout this program is not engaging with you more, because your outlook on life and learning brings me so much encouragement. The amount of acceptance and compassion you show for your students is insurmountable, and unfortunately, often overlooked. Thank you for challenging me, but also drawing out the vulnerability in me. I'm not an easy case to crack, but somehow I was able to let my guard down in your classes. This is a testament to you and the program, and I will forever be indebted to you for that.

Because of you and this program, I am full of hope.

Fondly,

Melyssa

5.2 Future Implications

As female leaders, we must continue to build each other up and empower the younger generations. Moving forward, understanding and showing compassion for others' stories is what will make us stronger. Especially in intercollegiate athletics—where women fill less than a quarter of head coach and athletic director positions¹⁸—we must feel confident in our stories. This confidence is drawn out when we finally commit to vulnerability and allow ourselves the opportunity to believe in our own personal journey. During my first year of intercollegiate coaching, for example, I was extremely guarded and emotionally unattached. This is just how I perceived my role as a coach to

¹⁸ Acosta, R. V., & Carpenter, L. J. (2012). *Women in intercollegiate sport: A longitudinal, national study 25-year update: 1977-2012*. Retrieved from www.acostacarpenter.org

be. Luckily, I dove into my meaning-making and educational studies during my second year as a coach. Through this process, I learned to accept my story and write my way towards meaning. This writing allowed my vulnerability to shine through, which inevitably led to a more compassionate and meaningful coaching role. With that being said, the hardest part about this revelation is actually applying vulnerability to leadership for females in college athletics.

So why do female leaders tend to shy away from this idea of vulnerability? Erin Buzuvis (2015) suggests that, “Discrimination, motivated by stereotypes about women and their compatibility for leadership in competitive athletics, is believed to erect significant barriers for entry to women seeking to advance into head coaching or senior administrative positions in athletics” (276)¹⁹. These stereotypes are not only perceived by males, but by females themselves. Mistakes or feelings of shame are often the focus of an individual, rather than the strengths and attributes that one brings to the table. This image that is created in one’s mind can take control and prevent an individual from truly growing. More specifically, these perceptions and expectations about a female’s image may very well explain why women limit themselves—in terms of leadership opportunities—in the world of intercollegiate athletics²⁰. Although the image of a compassionate and vulnerable leader may be seen as negative, I have found through personal experiences that confidence and growth as a leader develops most significantly

¹⁹Erin E. Buzuvis, *Barriers to Leadership for Women in College Athletics*, in *INTRODUCTION TO INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS* (Eddie Comeaux, ed., 2015)

²⁰ Sartore, M. L., & Cunningham, G. B. (2007). Explaining the under-representation of women in leadership positions of sport organizations: A symbolic interactionist perspective. *Quest*, 59, 244-265.

during those true moments of vulnerability. When an individual feels vulnerable, his/her most authentic self is demonstrated. This authenticity is what carries a leader through both the successes and the challenges.

As my story provides, there are several degrees' of challenges and successes that can come up in the world of intercollegiate athletics. As I have mentioned before, the first step in combating those challenges or feelings of weakness is to focus on one's meaning. More often than not, one's meaning-making and purpose have developed based on his or her past experiences. These experiences are what shape the way we live, lead, and learn. By appreciating our experiences and accepting them for all that they are, we become vulnerable and can begin to live with intention. Mary Dana Hinton, the President of the College of Saint Benedict, is one individual who has also emphasized the importance of vulnerability. She states, "I have found that making myself vulnerable and sharing my experiences with others not only strengthens my own leadership ability, it encourages others in their desire and ability to lead" (34)²¹. By sharing these vulnerable feelings, human beings start to connect and create more acceptance—both in others and in oneself. This vulnerability has the power to unlock confidence in others, while also allowing an individual to embrace her own story. This is what leadership is all about, and the philosophy that female leaders in athletics must have moving forward.

²¹ Hinton, Mary Dana. 2016. "Women's Leadership: Mission Strength and Personal Vulnerability Combine." *Diverse: Issues In Higher Education* 33, no. 3: 34. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

5.3 Conclusion

The act of sharing one's story can be an extremely powerful thing. Regardless of the relevancy or severity of a story, universal themes can be unpacked that help connect human beings on a deeper level. Through my stories, I have found meaning and belonging. I have learned to accept my experiences for what they are, and rather than being ashamed or embarrassed to tell my story—to embrace it. I have learned to embrace it not only for myself and my own personal growth, but also for the individuals who I hope to inspire or empower. Being vulnerable is a very challenging thing, but this is the first step in connecting with oneself and with others. This deeper connection does not need to be a rarity in intercollegiate athletics, but rather a standard. By accepting stories of all nature, leaders can continue to lead with authenticity and integrity. By showing vulnerability when it is most uncomfortable, we begin to grow. And when we begin to grow, we begin to lead greatly.

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